Researching and Writing a History of Natural Resources Management

Richard West Sellars

Writing a history of the management of nature in the national parks is, as one superintendent commented, "like taking a bite out of a two-thousand-pound marshmallow." There has been a lot going on since 1872 (when Yellowstone National Park was established), and 1916 (when the National Park Service was created), and 1929 (when George Wright became chief of NPS wildlife management), and 1963 (when the Leopold Committee and National Academy of Sciences reports on science and wildlife were issued), and even 1980–81 (when the State of the Parks Report was compiled). Any such study would have to be very broadly conceptualized.

My involvement began when I asked NPS Southwest Regional Director John Cook for support and got a positive, enthusiastic response. The backing and blessing of Dr. Eugene Hester, NPS associate director for natural resources, followed. At that time I had little detailed knowledge of the evolution of natural resource management in the parks and only a general notion of the topic's complexity.

Beginning with background reading in published books and articles, I soon concluded that a satisfactory history of park natural resource management could not be divorced from the overall history of the Park Service. For example, if the Service's resource management in the 1930s or the 1950s was not state-of-the-art, why not? What was it doing instead, and why? What was the role of science in natural resource management, and, coincidentally, what was the attitude of Service leadership toward science? How did science programs fare in competition with other programs? And so on.

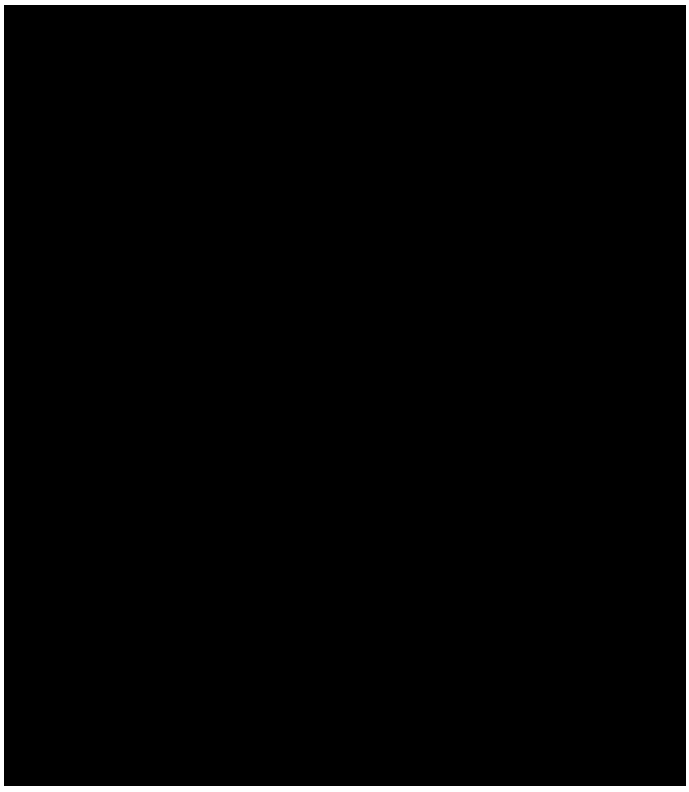
It also seemed most important to understand just what Congress and other involved parties intended with the 1916 National Park Service Act. The act's principal supporters included a number of visionaries, among them a landscape architect, a horticulturalist, and a former borax industry executive with his capable young assistant not long out of college. In looking at their motivations and other forces, I hoped to learn how treatment of the parks was affected by what Stephen Mather called the act's "double mandate" to leave them "unimpaired" while providing for their public use and enjoyment. Did they sense any incompatibility in this charge, given their conception of what parks were primarily for and what constituted impairment?

Why did the Service hire a cadre of landscape architects and engineers long before hiring scientists to investigate the dynamics of nature in the parks? Why did it kill large carnivores and stock lakes and streams with exotic fish in the 1920s? Could such practices have reasonably been judged consistent with the Service's legal mandate? Why did scientists beginning in the 1930s sense that they were a minority voice in Service affairs? Why did the Service oppose (or turn its back to) efforts to pass the Wilderness Act in the 1950s and early 1960s, at the same time it was pushing its billion-dollar Mission 66 development program? How did it move from its rhetorical justification of Mission 66 as a "preservation program" to its expressed concern for gene pools and biodiversity three decades later?

One of the chief difficulties in researching this topic has been the dearth of good secondary materials bearing on it. Many Service-related publications, such as the biographies of Directors Stephen Mather and Horace Albright, are generally uncritical if not adulatory depictions of the founding fathers and the growth of the national park system. John Ise's *Our National Park Policy* is more analytical and has often proved helpful. A few recent studies have analyzed natural resource management decision-making in individual parks, including Alfred Runte's *Yosemite*, Lary Dilsaver's and William Tweed's *Challenge of the Big Trees* (Sequoia–Kings Canyon), and David Harmon's *At the Open Margin* (Theodore Roosevelt). These books have helped set a trend that I hope will continue and that I am following in studying natural resource management in the whole system of large natural parks.

In pursuing this project, I hope to get an "internal" view by examining the personal viewpoints and the hopes and aspirations of officials like Mather, Albright, and Director Arno Cammerer and natural resource professionals like George Wright, Adolph Murie, and Victor Cahalane. It seems important not to rely solely on official reports and policy pronouncements but to determine

(***Researching and Writing***—*continued on page 24)*



George M. Wright. Photo by C.P. Russell.

(***Researching and Writing***—*continued from page 4)*

what prompted them and identify differences of opinion. Especially beginning with the George Wright era, resource management issues were often strongly debated within the Service. Personal expressions by key players can reveal alternative perspectives and illuminate the mindsets of the Service's leaders. Gathering these viewpoints has required in-depth research into the writings of a great variety of individuals inside and outside the Service over seven decades.

The National Archives in Washington holds a collection of dusty archival boxes containing Park Service documents which total about 2,500 linear feet—nearly one-half mile. Alas, this collection covers only up through part of Conrad Wirth's directorate (1951–64). A voluminous amount of subsequent material is found in the Washington National Records Center in Suitland, MD. Fortunately, these collections can be separated and called up by file codes according to functions or topics. Yet for the researcher interested in the period from 1916 to the recent past, this presents a truly formidable task—the necessary first sniff of the two thousand pound marshmallow.

The record collection in the Park Service library at Harpers Ferry Center is much smaller, but materials there are far easier to get at than are the documents at the National Archives and Suitland. Assisted by a helpful staff, I found these records another major source of information. Other valuable collections for specific periods are at the Yale University Library, the Pennsylvania State Archives, the Denver Public Library, and the Bancroft Library and the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at the University of California, Berkeley.

Record collections in national parks are another matter. Many are nonexistent; many others are poorly cared for, some being managed by part-time, untrained help. I often found it difficult to get information on park holdings before traveling to the parks. Most park staffs made earnest efforts to assist my research endeavors; the librarian and historian at Yosemite particularly come to mind.

Despite the Yosemite staff's very good work, that park's records badly need attention, as do Yellowstone's. If Yosemite and Yellowstone are national and international treasures, hallmarks of one of America's most high-minded aspirations, surely their collections documenting the national park movement are themselves treasures deserving the utmost attention and care. Overall, the records situation gives clear and irrefutable evidence that the Park Service, which prides itself in presenting major historic sites to the American people, has not taken sufficient pride in its own history to develop a professional records program.

Believing that my topic, combining national parks and ecological issues, is potentially of broad interest, I am attempting to write for both Park Service readers and for the general public. I am seeking to be soundly analytical and to take full advantage of my "academic freedom" to record and interpret history as I believe the sources warrant. So far, even though numerous Park Service readers have reviewed completed chapter drafts, there have been no efforts whatsoever to suppress unflattering findings or interpretations. As a result, publication by an academic or commercial press now seems quite likely, and I am hopeful that the Service's considerable investment in this project will be rewarded with a widely distributed product.

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